AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES FIELD STAFF

WHAT MIXTURE OF OLD AND NEW?

A Letter from A, Doak Barnett

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One of the outstanding characteristics of contemporary China is rapid change, New ideas, technology and social organization, borrowed to a large extent from various Western cultures, have been superimposed upon traditional Chinese society with a rapidity which, if viewed in historical perspective, is remarkable. This Process of change - the Chinese revolution - predates the existence of the Communists, but the Chinese Communists have seized control of the process, shifting it in new directions and accelerating the pace,

The changes now taking place in China are so rapid that it is easy for an observer of the Chinese scene to be impressed only by innovation to such an extent that he loses sight of what is permanent and enduring. How deep are many of the changes? To what degree are some of them more superficial than fundamental? In what way are the old and new combined into a complicated mixture? Where and how do strong subterranean currents of tradition continue to exist under the surface? These are extremely difficult questions to try to answer,

To what extent, for example, is the modern Chinese, whether Marxist or non-Marxist, really a successful rebel, against the past, or to what extent is he the captive, consciously or unconsciously, of old Chinese patterns of thought and behavior?

In my last letter I described the Chinese Communists' methods of indoctrination. These methods impress one as having a tremendous impact unon the minds of the Chinese people, and they doubtless do, And yet from time to time one has an experience which is jolting, and forces one to admit that the task of judging real change is subtle, complicated and extremely difficult,

Let me tell you about a young Chinese friend of mine here in Hong Kong,

Chen Pao-li (which is not his real name) is in his early twenties. He is a product of Western education in modern China,

and although he is a political refugee from Communism, in an intellectual sense he is certainly a Chinese revolutionary,

Pao-li comes from a landowning family with a tradition of officialdom and government service, and he was sent to college at Nankai University in North China. (Chou En-lai, now Premier of Communist China, started his career with a similar family and educational pedigree,) He was halfway through college when the Chinese Communists came to power, and like most politically conscious university students in China he was sympathetic to the Communist regime at the start, He and his schoolmates believed that what China needs is modernization and development, and perhaps, they felt, the Communists could press forward toward this aim.

Pao-li became disillusioned with the Communists sooner than most sf his schoolmates, however, Within a year, he developed strong objections to the authoritarian controls exercised by the Peking regime and decided to leave the mainland. His family was from South China, and he had relatives in Hong Kong, so there was a place to which he could go,

When he decided to become a political refugee, Pao-li did not abandon his interest in politics, On the contrary, he started to think even more seriously than he had in the past about the problems of development and modernization in China. In Hong Kong he began to read an increasing number of Western philosophical works and became more and more convinced that Western liberal philosophy should be introduced further in China to become the ideological basis of the Chinese revolution. Philosophically speaking, Pao-li slowly became an intellectual creature of the West, He now knows more about Bertrand Russell than he does about Confucius or even recent Chinese thinkers.

Pao-li has little sentimental attachment to Chinese tradition, at least on an intellectual level, and he believes that if China is to modernize it must be ideologically Westernized, The tragedy, in his mind, is that ideas from the Western liberal tradition did not take root rapidly enough in China, and that Marxism was given the opportunity to fill the vacuum created by the disintegration of old Chinese society and the discrediting of traditional Chinese thought,

After Pao-li came to Hong Kong, ideas of this sort began to develop in his mind, until he reached the point of wanting to do something about it, Consequently, he and a group of like-minded Chinese friends in Hong Kong decided to publish a literary-philosophical magazine in order to propagate the liberal Western thought to which they subscribe, They also decided to translate a number of Western books into Chinese, to spread non-Marxist philosophical ideas among young Chinese in areas not under Communist control,

This publishing enternrise developed slowly. The magazine and books did not have any spectacular success, but the

'enterprise was at least able to survive - in a place where most publishing efforts are ephemeral,

The next project which took shape in Pao-li's mind was a novel, He decided a short while ago that he wanted to put on paper some of his ideas about the revolution in China, and that the novel would probably be the most effective medium, He formulated an outline', found a publisher, and is now engaged in writing the book,

The novel's setting is recent China, and chronologically it covers the Kuomintang era and early period of Communist rule. The story is about a triangle which involves a father, a son, and a girl who is the father's concubine and the son's lover. The theme in this dramatic thread of the story is the conflict of generations in modern China - a struggle which is bitter and involves a clash of politics, philosophy and morals, as well as the psychological conflicts of father and son and the amatory competition involved in the triangle. The political theme is complicated too, and is intertwined with the personal relationships in the story, One of the fundamental ideas in the book is the conviction that the father's generation was unable to carry out the Chinese revolution successfully, and lost the struggle to the Communists, because despite a veneer of Westernization it was too much weighted down by outmoded traditional Chinese ideas, moral values and habits of behavior, The father's generation was semimodern but not modern enough to be successful revolutionaries,

Both Pao-li's publishing enterprise and his current novel are an expression of hi6 own revolutionary (in an intellectual rather than purely political sense) attitude - his rebellion against the past and his belief that new ideas and behavior must supplant old Chinese tradition. His novel is also a clue to his reaction against old patterns of personal and family relations - a reaction which has been widespread and deep among youth in contemporary China,

To me Pao-li, whoa I have known well during the past three years, has always seemed in many respects to be an example of the most Westernized kind of modern, revolutionary Chinese youth.

Then, not long ago he dropped in to pay me a visit, and I suddenly discovered another Pao-li - one I had not known during these past three years,

As soon as he sat down on the couch in my apartment, I sensed that he had a problem and wanted help. It did not take long for it to come out,

"This is very embarrassing for me," he said, "but T am going to ask you for a favor."

He paused and folded his hands, resting them between his knees. He was dressed in Western clothes, and had the clean-cut appearance typical of many young modern Chinese.

"I need some money," he went on, speaking in English. "Not a gift, but a loan. I will be able to pay it back in a matter of weeks, as soon as I finish my novel. The publisher has guaranteed an advance as soon as I give him the manuscript."

"Perhaps I can help you with a small loan," I answered. "What do you need it for?"

I asked even though I really knew without asking that his need for money was probably connected with the approach of the Chinese lunar New Year. Chinese New Year is a time for settling all debts and accounts. It is a time, also, for celebrations, which cost money.

But the thought flashed across my mind: "What does Chinese New Year mean to someone like Pao-li?" It is an old-fashioned festival. Most of the customs associated with it are survivals of a past era - long predating the modern revolution in China.

"Well," Pao-li said, "you know that New Year is coming. It is going to involve a lot of expenses for me. You see, I am the head of our family."

"You are what?" I knew that Pao-li's father, a former Nationalist official, was alive and was also a refugee from the mainland. I thought perhaps I had misunderstood him.

He saw that I was baffled, and he laughed.

"Yes, I am the head of our family."

I became interested. "How is that possible?" I asked. "I don't understand."

He smiled in a slightly embarrassed way. "It is a long story," he said.

"I have plenty of time," I replied quickly.

So he began. This is what he told me, reduced to the essential facts.

Pao-li's grandfather was a wealthy man and in many respects a typical old-style Chinese family patriarch. He had three sons. The eldest son died young. Pao-li's father was the second son, and his uncle was the third.

Loss of the eldest son was a great blow to Pao-li's grandfather, He wanted the family's continuity to be unbroken,

and according to tradition the leadership of the family should be passed on through the eldest son of the eldest son, And since his eldest son had died as a youth, this was not possible,

That is, it was not possible in the normal way, But there are traditional means of dealing with such situations, and Pao-li's grandfather decided that he could solve the problem,

This is what he did, He first contacted a friend whose daughter had died when very young, and they agreed to "marry" their dead son and daughter, A ceremony was arranged, and a posthumous marriage performed. Step number one was thereby accomplished; his dead son could be considered a married man. The next problem was to give him a son, This is where Pao-li came into the picture, His grandfather decided that Pao-li should be "adopted" by the dead first son whose marriage he had just performed. In this way, Pao-li would become first son of the first son, and the proper direct inheritor of the family line. A ceremony was arranged, and this was done, Pao-li thenceforth had two sets of parents - his own blood parents and the dead parents to which he was adopted.

When the grandfather died last year, therefore, it was Pao-li rather than his father who became the head of the family, with theoretical control of family property and all the obligations and responsibilities of family leadership,

I listened with fascination to Pao-li's account of all this,

"Does this mean, thsn, that you actually do control all the family property?" I asked,

"No," he replied, "that is one of the difficulties, My father and uncle, and all the elder relatives in the family, don't really turn over responsibility for these things to me. But my theoretical position is recognized, and therefore at New Year I am the,one who must arrange a family dinner, pay formal visits, and give gifts to all the family members. That is what I need the money for,"

"And do you really have to do all these things?" I asked,

"Yes."

T lent him the money,

But for a long time after he left, I thought about the ridiculous anomalies of Pao-li's position.

He *is* a very Westernized young man who in many respects is a revolutionary. He believes that new ideas must supplant Chinese tradition, He blames the political failures of the older generation in China to a large extent upon an inability to slough

off the impedimenta of the past, His writings reflect rebellion against old moral values and social ties - in particular against the family. Yet he finds himself trapped by family obligations imposed upon him as a result of actions by his relatives which he himself considers almost fantastic,

How much is he really a captive of the past against which he rebels? It is doubtful if even he himself knows.

A case such as Pao-li's makes one stop and think, To what extent is rapid social change deceiving? What is left of tradition under the surface, and how much is the old intermixed with the new?

In Communist China, for example, where almost everything today appears to be in flux, is the persistence of tradition greater than one might assume at first glance? It is, of course, easier to ask the question than to answer it,

Does all of this mean that "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"? No, The process of change is certainly not illusory. Tremendous real changes have taken place in China in the modern period, and under the Communists the changes are greater and more rapid than ever before,

But people like Pao-li make one pause and think about the difficulty of judging the permanent reality and actual dimensions of the changes which one observes in a revolution such as that now going on in China,

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